

The Didactic Element in Tennyson

by Walter Woodroe Douglass

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THE DIDACTIC ELEMENT IN TENNYSON.

A person enters a great art gallery, drawn by the report of the beautiful pictures there, and spends hours in contemplation of the work before him. Objects, persons, and scenes that in real life he would have passed with scarcely a second thought, now draw forth his warmest praise. He feels the thrill the painter felt, because he sees the thing as the painter saw it. The point of view has been so selected that the elements in the picture form a consistent whole. Judicious selection and emphasis have increased this unity until the very "mood" of the original, be it object, person, or scene, pervades the picture. The observer has been quickened, his sense of the beautiful has been stimulated, and his power to differentiate elements of beauty in the commonplace and to combine them into harmonious wholes has been awakened. Yes he went into the gallery for pleasure, not for instruction, and comes from the gallery with no sense of having been "lectured."

So a person, attracted by Tennyson's reputation and dipping into his poetry, will find pictures -- beautiful pictures whose subjects the reader might have passed in

real life without a second thought. How probable he would have passed the scene described in the opening lines of "Enoch Arden" with the remark "A fishing village", not noticing that the parted cliff formed a frame for a scene containing elements of beauty. If he had seen "Mariana in the Moated Grange", would he have noted the moss-crusts flower-pots, the rusted nails, the broken sheds and like details that have about them such an air of desolation that the recital of them might turn the scale in her favor, influencing someone to espouse her cause?

A person admitting herself to have one or more of the traits of character set forth in the poems, "Lillian", "Isabel", "Adeline" and the rest of the character portraits, might be astonished at being brought face to face with the complete counterpart of herself in terms of praise or questioning.

Thus Tennyson teaches the reader to see, to see wholes instead of parts; but at no time does the reader feel that he is being "lectured".

Again, a man goes to the theatre for entertainment and, watching with intense interest a standard play, finds himself passing judgment upon motives and actions of the

characters. Such is the effect of dramatic art that a man, be none more easy-going and indifferent to moral issues, must pass judgment and keen judgment at that. True, his judgment will be influenced by the "mood" or "atmosphere" of the play; and herein lies the playwright's responsibility. However, when the spectator leaves the theatre, he feels that he has been to a place of entertainment and, if there has been any "preaching", he, by his own skill and insight, has extracted it from the play.

So, in the narrative and dramatic poems of Tennyson, the reader sees many phases of human life in action before him. He feels free to judge or not to judge, but, as a matter of fact, he does judge. Nor does it always end in mere judgment. As in the theatre, certain scenes seem to be from one's own experience, but carried out to the logical extreme with startling revelation, so, in Tennyson's poetry, certain characters seem to have souls akin to the reader's own, and between the lines he reads comradeship and sympathy or else self-accusation and condemnation. The lesson, however, is between the lines: the reader never charges Tennyson with "didactics", but rather praises his own insight in getting at the deeper meaning of the poem, hidden from the average reader. And so to tell all that

Tennyson has taught, one would have to know the innermost thoughts of every reader.

In a great many of Tennyson's poems, however, so pronounced is the "mood" of the poem, that readers in general, readily agree as to the lesson taught; and so often does this average judgment agree with ideas known, from other sources, to have been Tennyson's, that one is led to two hypotheses: first, that Tennyson's enthusiasm thus unconsciously influenced his art when dealing with a favorite idea; and, secondly, that he desired to propagate an idea and set about the task in the subtle fashion of teaching men as though he taught them not.

The latter hypothesis is supported by Tennyson's known desire to make the world better, and, barring the logician's circulus in probandum, by the poem, "The Poet" (1830):

"He saw thro' life and death, thro' good and ill,
He saw thro' his own soul.
The marvel of the everlasting will, an open
scroll,
Before him lay.
The viewless arrows of his thoughts were
headed,
And winged with flame.

.
So many minds did gird their orbs with beams,
Tho' one did fling the fire.
.

Thus truth was multiplied on truth, the world
Like one great garden showed."

The first question to be considered is, How did
Tennyson forge his "viewless arrows"; how teach with-
out text-book or lecture?

The story of "Enoch Arden" is an excellent example
of the absence of formal teaching. The story is told:

By direct statement; as,

"Here on the beach a hundred years ago,
Three children of three houses . . . played
Among the waste and lumber of the shore."

By indirect statement or inference; as, the betroth-
al of Annie and Enoch:

"Philip . . . saw the pair . . .
And in their eyes and faces read his doom."

And by word-picture; as, the agony when Enoch

" . . . would have knelt but that his knees
Were feeble, so that falling prone he dug
His fingers into the wet earth, and prayed."

The reader has the fishing village and its environment
before him; he sees the action, hears the conversation,
notes the joy, the sorrow, the agony, the resignation, and
is then left to the company of his own thoughts and quick-
ened emotions; for nowhere in the poem is there moral
comment.

"So passed the strong heroic soul away,

And when they buried him, the little port
Had seldom seen a costlier funeral."

The very simplicity of these closing lines makes the reader wish he were able to proclaim to the world the greatness of the unselfish Enoch. Thus the reader is impressed with the nobility of unselfish character by having a noble type thrown upon his sympathy.

In "Aylmer's Field" the characters are drawn with such emphasis upon the heart-lacking pride of "Sir Aylmer Aylmer, that almighty man, the country God"; upon the weakness of his wife; the unselfish, womanly nature of the daughter; the natural expression of passion in her lover; and the wholesomeness of the vicar and his family -- the stress laid upon all these is such as to bring out the shams and conventions of society in such guise that the democratic reader, though he may object to didactics as such, takes a keen delight in the sermon that the vicar aims so squarely at the "country God" and all his kind. But Tennyson is not preaching to his reader; it is the vicar passing judgment upon Sir Aylmer and Lady Aylmer, a judgment in which the reader concurs. Thus Tennyson denounced the sham of mere title, not alone in that he made Sir Aylmer's title lead to the tragedy, for the

incongruity that gives rise to tragedy is often justifiable, but in that he parodied that title in such phrases as "the country God" and "that almighty man."

In the monologue, "Maud", the speaker's father, caught by an unscrupulous financial manoeuver, had lost his fortune and, indirectly, his life; and so the son rages against the "lust of gain, in the spirit of Cain". While it is the poor maddened youth who is raging, the reader cannot help feeling that Tennyson is in full sympathy with the sentiment. Two circumstances contribute to this impression: first, the degree to which the sentiment is elaborated, as if the poet found a fascination in the subject; and, secondly, the fact that the poet put such impassioned utterances into the mouth of a character for whom he had to enlist the reader's unqualified sympathy in order to make the poem consistent. While monologue is usually regarded as a safe method for the statement of any doctrine without implicating the writer, so strongly is the case put in this poem by making the hero prefer the direct slaughter of war, "loud war by land and sea", that the British public cried out against Tennyson when the poem made its appearance, inopportunately, as the nation was mourning its losses on Crimean battle fields. With vacant places at so many

firesides, the people were in no mood to make proper allowance for exaggeration due to the depth of poetic feeling.

Thus have been given three examples of Tennyson's method of teaching: the presentation of a noble type, as Enoch Arden, so simply that the reader is impelled to commend; the telling of a story, as "Aylmer's Field", with the use of epithets calculated to bias the reader's judgment, and further having a character in good repute, as the vicar, denounce that of which the author does not approve; and, thirdly, the use of impassioned monologue, as in "Maud".

There is, however, in Tennyson's narrative and dramatic poetry, a teaching other than that by skillful presentation of characters; a form of teaching which, like beauty in Emerson's "Rhodora", is "its own excuse for being" --allegory; and allegory, well conceived, needs no defense against whatever unpleasant there may be in the charge of "didactics".

In "The Palace of Art", the palace represents the advantages of learning and culture which the Soul -- a selfish person -- did not wish to share with others until experience taught her that none can live unto him-

self and be happy. In "The Lady of Shalott", while the lady may be a type of person out of touch with the world, constructing her theories from second-hand data, the theories and data are allegorically represented by the web she is weaving and the reflections she sees in her mirror. Love tempts her from her seclusion, but one glance at the real world wrecks, not only her theories, but also her means of getting any more of the shadowy data; she wishes to join the world again, but is out of vital relation with it, and so perishes.

One of the examples just given is pure allegory and the other contains parts that are allegorical and parts that are typical. Tennyson has a third form -- a mixture of the typical and the allegorical, not in one poem merely, but in one character. Thus King Arthur, in the "Idylls of the King", is a type of noble manhood, and at the same time, according to Tennyson's own statement, represents the Soul of man in its struggle to overcome the Flesh. The queen is a type of unfaithful womanhood and at the same time represents the Sensual in Life. Merlin cannot so truly be called a type but can very well represent man's intellect.

One more use of allegory remains to be mentioned,

isolated cases which seem to be artistic touches here and there to round out the general allegory rather than parts with separate lessons. An example is the three queens. So much care is taken in describing these queens, and so much of importance connected with their presence, that they cannot be allowed to pass as mere poetic creations. They are said to represent the three Christian graces that strengthen the Soul.

But if one may be influenced definitely at art galleries and theatres without feeling that he is being preached to, and may read allegories without similar offense, so one may listen to reminiscences and views of an old man or woman, or any person of acknowledged strength of character, and be led to measure his own soul by that of the narrator, without in the least imputing to the narrator a desire to set himself up as a criterion. Such is the case in the reading of "In Memoriam." It is soul in the presence of soul; and if comparisons are drawn, it is the reader that draws them; if lessons are taught, it is the reader who is both teacher and pupil, for Tennyson is so immersed in his grief, and, again, so absorbed in his search for light, for truth, that he is not conscious of the presence of another.

And yet Tennyson's faith, his ideals - his whole nature, was such that this ingenuous shadowing forth of his own soul in its struggle for light had in it by nature all the elements of art that make a picture complete in its beauty or a drama effective in its purpose. So true is this that the poem is said to have unified the highest religious, philosophic, and scientific thought of the day. Professor Sigwick* speaks of its influence on his thought apart from its poetic charm, and calls the poem a monument of faith. Genung* derives the lesson that love is immortal.

"In Memoriam" is a lyric and yet, since its teaching is not that of direct statement, it seems necessary to create another division to include songs and odes. These, when due allowance is made for fanciful mood and poetic exaggeration, often can be relied upon to furnish at least a clue to the author's system of thought; for example, one need not doubt that Tennyson is giving his own views as to England's value to the world in the "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington".

Thus Tennyson taught - if teaching we may call it - as the artist teaches, by pictures; as the dramatist teaches, by the "mood" or "atmosphere" in which he places

his characters; as poets love to teach, by allegory and by lyric; and as all the great characters in history have taught, by the influence of soul upon soul.

So much for how he taught. Subtle as was the method, the result has been so marked that Tennyson is regarded as one of the great ethical teachers of the world. Hence has arisen a literary paradox - the work of an author on whose pages is no trace of formal teaching, heralded by covers labeled "Great Teachers" (Forster), "Three Great Teachers of Our Time" (Page); "Great Books as Life-Teachers" (Hillis), "Tennyson as a Religious Teacher" (Masterman), and "Science and a Future Life" - containing "Tennyson as Prophet"- (Myers).

In connection with the result of Tennyson's teaching it may be of interest to survey briefly the material with which he worked and the lessons emanating therefrom. As to theme and lesson, the reading of nearly three hundred poems including all his better known poems and excluding his dramas, has left upon the mind of the present writer the idea of world-wide love and faith in its ultimate accomplishment.

The fountain in the garden, representing the mind of the poet, in the poem, "The Poet's Mind", draws its water

from the brain of the purple mountain,

"And the mountain draws it from Heaven above,
And it sings a song of undying love."

In "The Poet's Song", the sweetest of bird music was hushed in tribute to the song of the poet,

"For he sings of what the world will be
When the years have died away".

Love, from the narrowest to the broadest application of the term, might be taken as the dominant chord in Tennyson's poetry. Much of his earlier poetry consists of portraits of girls and women; as, "Lillian"; love narratives; as, "The Miller's Daughter"; and love songs as, "The Burial of Love". Although he afterward suppressed some of this earlier effusion, he never lost sympathy for love's first passion, as is evidenced by the sympathetic little love episodes throughout his work, flashing even amid sorrow, as in the later of the two poems entitled, "The Sisters".

However, the horizon of love seemed to broaden; in addition to romantic love in its narrowness, there appeared in his works love in the family, as in "Dora"; an arraignment of the intellectual forces that decried family life, in "The Princess" and later in "Romley's Remorse"; and love for all mankind in the "Idylls of the

King". "In Memoriam" shows a love of man for man that is immortal. "Enoch Arden" introduces the idea of self-sacrifice for love, while "Aylmer's Field" takes up the cudgels against those who would sacrifice love to pride and substitute heartless formalism.

Political, philosophical, and religious themes are not wanting, but are usually introduced by an episode of love unrequited or frustrated, for which they seek consolation or at least explanation; thus the greed of gain is introduced in "Maud"; political and social equality in the two "Locksley Halls" and religion and philosophy in "In Memoriam".

Interrogated as to the greatest good in the world, Tennyson's poetry has, in the present instance, answered with Drummond, "Love is the greatest good". Even "love that never found his earthly close" is not in vain, as is said in "Love and Duty":

"Wait and Love himself will bring
The drooping flower of knowledge to fruit
Of wisdom."

And further, in "In Memoriam":

"'Tis better to have loved and lost,
Than never to have loved at all."

While love is thus commended by its all-pervading

presence in Tennyson's poetry, other matters of less frequent mention are forcibly presented by a skilful shaping of events, a judicious placing of emphasis, and a wise choice of words - methods already illustrated by reference to "Enoch Arden", "Aylmer's Field", and "Maud".

One group of poems, with frustrated love as a starting point, sure of universal sympathy, attacks social caste, in which deadening formalism crushes out and supplants vital, purifying love. Thus, in "Edward Morris" the suit was "hipt to death by him

"That was a God, and is a lawyer's clerk,
The rentroll Cupid of our rainy isles;
 . . . and in one month
They wedded her to sixty thousand pounds."

Also, in "Locksley Hall", Amy is bitterly denounced for being "puppet to a father's threat and servile to a shrewish tongue", and so marrying a man who would hold her "Something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse". Again, the brother of the heroine of "Maud",

" . . . with a riding whip
Leisurely tapping a glossy boot,
Gorgonized me (the hero) from head to foot
With a stony British stare",

because this proud young lord wished his sister to give up the hero in favor of the

"Master of half a servile shire";

and later interference resulted in crime and separation.
And "The Ringlet" tells of a lady-love, "bought and sold!"

In all these cases the contemptuous phraseology and general "atmosphere" of the poem condemn the artificial society. In "Aylmer's Field", as has been pointed out, the vicar's sermon is a merciless denunciation, while in "Lady Clara Vere de Vere" the oft quoted

"'Tis only noble to be good"

and

"Kind hearts are more than coronets
And simple faith than Norman blood"

are aimed at all who, like the Lady Clara

" . . . fixed a vacant stare
And slew a youth with her noble blood".

And in the monologue, "Edward Gray", the sympathy begotten at the grave and kept alive by the refrain,

"There lies the body of Ellen Adair,
And there the heart of Edward Gray,"

re-acts and becomes censure for the parents who caused the separation.

Tennyson gives the other side in "Lady Clara", whose loss of rank makes no difference with her lover; in "The Beggar Maid", in which the beggar maid marries the king; and in "Lord Burliegh" in which the nobleman, in disguise, wins and marries a poor girl. There is all the more pity

that the poor wife feels the difference in social station and pines away.

Thus, with love as a starting point, Tennyson has attacked the social system of his country and of the world -- as far as it concerns social caste.

The preceding grouping of the poems treating cold formalism brings out the curious fact that, in one set, it is always the young man who is deprived of his sweetheart of high birth; in the other, it is always the young man who overlooks the low birth of the girl in question. Mere compilation of data would seem to indicate that Tennyson believed men to be more constant than women. Nothing in the poems show that he had this belief and the matter is here mentioned merely to emphasize the fact that in getting at Tennyson's meaning, not mechanical analysis of material, but appreciative interpretation of mood must be taken into account.

In another group of poems, Tennyson uses love as a background against which to show the ugliness of selfishness. This group includes the poems of the group touching social caste, for selfishness is at the bottom of social distinctions.

Unselfishness is silently preached in such poems as "Dora" and "Godiva", becoming sublime in "Enoch Arden".

The method has already been illustrated in this paper with "Enoch Arden" as an example. Dora, a farmer's daughter, because of the unselfishness of her love for her uncle, her cousin, and, later, his wife and child, gives up all that is dear to her, even to the love for which she is making the sacrifice. Tennyson keeps her in the foreground. The other persons belong in the poem because they are related to her, and her unselfish disposition is the poet's means of unity.

Godiva's love for her people is put to severe test, but modesty, dear as life to her, is not allowed to stand between her people and the relief she can bring to them.

Indirectly, in the invitation "To the Rev. F. D. Maurice" to visit the Isle of Wight, Tennyson touches this same question:

"We might discuss the Northern sin
Which made a selfish war begin,
Till you should turn to dearer matters,
Dear to the man that is dear to God;
How best to help the slender store,
How mend the dwellings of the poor."

Here the word "selfish" is linked with the word "sin"; and the acts of generosity, with the "man that is dear to God."

Self-sufficiency and greed are placed in an increasingly unfavorable light in "A Character", "The Palace of Art", "Locksley Hall", and "Aylmer's Field", meeting bit-

ter invective in "Maud", in which, as has been said, war is preferred to the "lust of gain, in the spirit of Cain."

In the poem, "A Character", just mentioned, is a sketch of a person who:

"With lips depressed as he were meek,
Himself unto himself he sold;
Upon himself, himself did feed:
Quiet, dispassionate, and cold."

Worthy of a separate group is King Arthur. His love is so broad, so deep, that to say that he is a type of unselfishness is not to say enough. He seems beyond the suggestion of self-interest.

Thus Tennyson commended a world-wide love, denounced sham and formalism, and pleaded for unselfish, brotherly daily-life. The chord struck is like that of the poets of early romanticism, but more subdued. Tennyson did not expect to see political, social, and religious systems made perfect in his day. He could not approve of violence. He preferred:

* "A land of settled government,
A land of just and old renown,
Where Freedom broadens slowly down,
From precedent to precedent;
Where faction seldom gathers head
But by degree to fulness wrought
The strength of some diffusive thought
Hath time and space to work and spread."

That he had some such "diffusive thought" is fre-

* "You ask me why, though ill at ease."
-19-

quently evidenced. In "Love thy land, with love far brought" is the stanza:

"Ev'n now we hear with inward strife
A motion toiling in the gloom -
The spirit of the years to come
Yearning to mix himself with Life."

In L'Envoi of "The Day-Dream" are the lines:

"All that else the years will show,
The poet-forms of stranger hours,
The vast Republics that may grow,
The Federations and the Powers."

And in "Locksley Hall":

"Yet I doubt not thro' the ages one increas-
ing purpose runs,
And thoughts of men are widen'd with the pro-
cess of the suns."

Such belief is shown by contrast in the toast in "The Vision of Sin":

"Drink to lofty hopes that cool -
Vision of a perfect State;
Drink we last, the public fool,
Frantic love and frantic hate."

Tennyson wished to advance the cause, but believed
"raw Haste, half-sister to Delay" and so sought to keep

" . . . noble England whole,
And save the one true seed of freedom sown
Betwixt a people and their ancient throne,
That sober freedom out of which there springs
Our loyal passion for our temperate kings:
For, saving that, ye help to save mankind
Till public wrong be crushed into dust,
And drill the raw world for the march of mind,
Till crowds at length be sane and crowns be
just".

Thus he wrote in the "Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington" and a similar thought in a more martial spirit, is shown in "Britons, Guard Your Own".

These political utterances are all of a lyrical character, except two, those from "Locksley Hall" and "The Vision of Sin"; but even these seem better suited to a man of Tennyson's habits of thought than to the characters speaking the lines in question.

Such was his attitude toward the state, such, the present writer believes, was his attitude toward the church - that in the fulness of time old things would be superseded by new and better, but, that until the time for casting away "Excalibur" really came, the world was best served by defending the Faith, the vice-gerent of Absolute Truth.

In the volume, "Poems by Two Brothers", Tennyson's religious utterances accord with the orthodox belief of the day, and are expressed with boyish lack of reserve. Later, in many of his narrative poems, the strongest and best characters are actuated by Christian motives and give utterance to Christian sentiment; as, Enoch Arden, and King Arthur and others in the "Idylls". This is also true of such monologues as "Columbus", "The Voyage of Maeldune",

and "Sir John Oldcastle"; while the very motive of the monologue, "In the Children's Hospital", is the nurse's belief in the absolute necessity of the existence of the Christ.

In none of these poems is the poet responsible for more than the "mood" or "atmosphere", and that is one of Christian faith; even in "The Supposed Confession of a Second-rate Sensitive Mind not in Unity with Itself", in "Despair", and in "Two Voices", while there is an element of doubt, the balance is kept in favor of orthodoxy. This is accomplished in the "Supposed Confessions" by the epithet, "Second-rate" as applied to the mind of the person making the confession; in "Despair", by a prose foreword explaining the speaker's state of mind; while, in "Two Voices" the same result is achieved by giving an air of finality to the utterances of the orthodox voice.

That Tennyson was thus watchful lest he cause any one to stumble in the faith, is further evidenced by the fact that he omitted the "Supposed Confessions" from subsequent editions and, moreover, did not offer for publication the various passionate verses, the strong crying of his soul during the years his mind was wrestling with the scientific phase of religion. It was only when his mature judgment

decided to rest his belief in Christianity wholly on faith and he could pen the introduction beginning, "Strong Son of God", that Tennyson molded the passionate questionings of years into the beautiful, triumphant lyric, "In Memoriam". Nor was this all: before his death he gave direction that all volumes of his poems should end with the calmly confident strains of "Crossing the Bar".

And yet, in some of the poems mentioned, there remain unanswered questionings, doubts which a person who was fully satisfied with the creeds of Christianity would have suppressed as having a tendency to cause young people to desire a new order of things. With and of this group may be mentioned "The Higher Pantheism", with its question, "Is He not all but thou, that hast the power to feel 'I am I'?" "De Profundus", with its hint of a previous existence of the soul; "Despair", with the protest, "But the God of Love and of Hell together -- they cannot be thought"; and "The Ancient Sage", with its "Cleave ever to the sunnier side of doubt and cling to Faith beyond the forms of Faith".

If, then, this line of thought has been consistently carried out, Tennyson, in his social, political, and religious views, was a radical at heart and a conservative in practice -- a poet of the Revolution placed in a succeeding generation, there secretly to inculcate the doctrine of the

brotherhood of man, that the cause for which so much blood had flowed might yet be saved to the world. So unobtrusively did he go about his task that there is nothing unpleasantly didactic about his work - in fact, some degree of analysis is necessary to trace the didactic element. The social condition was ripe for his attack, the political received more cautious treatment, and the religious, if reached at all, was darkly touched in symbols,-

"For he sings of what the world will be,
When the years have died away."

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